

My name is Manuela Wagner. I am Assistant Professor of Foreign Language Education, Associate Director of Teachers for a New Era, and Director of the Linkage Through Language Program at the University of Connecticut. I make this testimony as a private person in the capacity of an Applied Linguist.

I support bill 279 that requires two credits of world language study for high school graduation. In order for our students to become competitive in their professional and functional in their private lives we need to make sure that they are able to communicate effectively with members of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Providing opportunities and even incentives for our students to learn world languages and to become culturally aware and interculturally competent should be one of our most important goals in education. Indeed, educators at all levels agree that global citizenship, international education and diversity should be at the center of curriculum development.

It is my belief that we put our students at a disadvantage if we do not allow for a world language high school graduation requirement. More specifically, I fear that we widen the achievement gap and prevent Connecticut students from having equitable resources in their education. It is conceivable that more affluent districts would continue to offer world language courses even in the absence of a world language graduation requirement, whereas less affluent school districts might limit their world language education offerings if world languages were not a requirement. This would put students in less affluent communities at a disadvantage in continuing their education and on the job market.

I am especially concerned with findings in the proposed High School Reform "The Connecticut Plan: Academic and Personal Success for Every Middle and High School Student" (<http://www.cea.org/upload/Ad-Hoc-Final-Plan-HS-Reform.pdf>), which recommended to remove the planned 2-year world language high school graduation requirement. The report stated the following reasons for this decision: inequitable opportunities for students to take world language courses in elementary and middle school, "statewide shortage of world language teachers", and reasons "centering on what scholars know about children's acquisition of language" (p. 16).

Although I agree with the general notion of that teaching languages earlier is good practice, I believe it would be detrimental to our students' education if we removed the planned world language graduation requirement.

Research investigating age-related factors of foreign language acquisition provides a much more complex picture than "the earlier, the better" (for an overview of research in age-related factors see e.g., Marinova-Todd, Marshall, and Snow, 2000; Birdsong 1999). Birdsong (2005; p. 36) concludes:

"There is an understandable tendency in discussions of the underlying sources of age effects in L2 learning and processing to isolate a single mechanism or to focus on one type of mechanism. Yet, this practice often simplifies the phenomena in question and polarizes stances on an extremely textured set of issues."

Independently of how we interpret the results of this research we cannot argue that students have advantages if we do not require a world language for graduation in high school. The argument to not require a foreign language now because we do not have enough schools with foreign language programs in place in lower grades does not help students who graduate from high school and does not create more language programs in lower grades.

I agree that it would be beneficial for students to be exposed to world language study from elementary through high school. However, I consider it a wrong conclusion to wait until such programs are in place because we hinder our students from having equitable opportunities in their education now. A report by the Business Forum for Multilingualism established by the European Commission entitled "languages mean business: companies work better with languages" confirmed a former recommendation of "mother tongue plus two".

Although EU initiatives and Community funding can provide an important impetus to the work at national and regional levels, the bulk of the work when it comes to supporting multilingualism will have to be done by the Member States. It is therefore important that the Member States continue

to work towards their mutually agreed common objective from the Summit meeting in Barcelona 2002: Every citizen should learn two languages in addition to his or her mother tongue.

We would like to see multilingualism being encouraged more actively at all school levels. First and foremost, the choice of languages needs to be widened. At higher levels, learning methods need to be more applied and practice oriented. Proper recognition should be awarded for language skills in school curricula and at a later stage in the assessment of job candidates. In a different context, language skills need to be acknowledged in an appropriate way in centrally negotiated agreements between the social partners. <http://www.rln-london.com/pdf/LanguageMeanBusinessReport.pdf>, p.15)

It makes sense that the ability to communicate with people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds will give our students an edge in the workforce also in the United States, not just in Europe.

We know that our students have advantages when they are able to communicate with people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Not putting a world language high school graduation requirement in place will a) put our students at a disadvantage and b) not lead to better world language proficiency in our students. Putting a world language high school graduation requirement in place will make sure that a) world language education is a core subject that is taken seriously in every school, b) students have more equitable opportunities to continue their studies in higher education and c) have a better chance to become competitive in today's globalized world.